SCRIPT OF SON ET LUMIÈRE

(SOUND AND LIGHT SHOW)

OF

THE ROCK ART AND CAVE ART GALLERY OF THE GOVERNMENT MUSEUM CHENNAI

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Back Cover : *Mural* Painting, *Sittannavasal* Cave, Pudukottai District, Tamilnadu.

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PREFACE

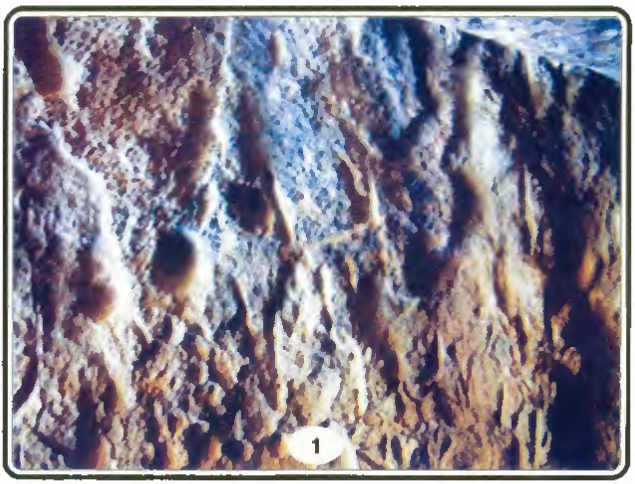
The Rock and Cave Art Gallery represents an effort to simulate reality that is exceptional in Indian Museums especially galleries presenting history. This gallery coincided with the completion of 150 years of the founding of the Government Museum, Chennai (Madras), making it still more memorable.

A lot of research in a team mode using Participatory Approaches preceded the setting up of this gallery. A team of Curators, some of the staff of the Government College of Arts and Crafts at the initiative of the then Principal, R.B.Bhaskaran and the Commissioner of Museums (the writer), the last sometimes in indifferent health, travelled extensively to Rock Art sites in Tamilnadu, many of which are located in highly inaccessible hilly locations. For example, *Vellerikombai* in the Nilgiris is about 14 kilometres by trek into deep forest involving steep climbs and sheer drops. The team also visited other states to visit sites, learn about Rock Art and how they were presented in museum conditions. The Indira Gandhi Museum of Man, *Bhopal*, the famous *Bhimbetka* caves near Bhopal, the Rock Art Society of India at *Agra* and the museums in *Delhi* are some of the important places among these. We gathered material both knowledge (textual) and visual material. Internet sites like the *Lascaux* Cave in France were also browsed to see their presentation. Extensive reading also formed part of the preparation.

This material and the sites are presented in the gallery with interactive commentary and lighting as a son-et-lumière. Since visitors may like to take with them in written form the commentary and the rare visual material, this book is published as a guide. It not only contains a description of the visual scenes, but also interprets it in the light of historical theory and knowledge. For example, the scene in *Vellerikombai* is interpreted based on this writer's theory of Holistic Dating brought out in 2000 AD as a Bulletin of the Government Museum, Chennai (Monograph). In the Cave Art section, the scenes in *Sittannavasal* and *Thirugokarnam* in Pudukottai District, *Tirumalai* in Tiruvannamalai District and *Mahabalipuram (Mamallapuram)* have been interpreted in the light of Hindu and Jain Iconography and mythology also along with historical details. In short, this publication attempts to be applied history like applied science. The Government of Tamilnadu has generously funded this project and several publications this year including the present one. I hope this guide will also be good reference material for scholars.

Chennai - 600 008,
30.11.2002.

(Dr.R.Kannan, Ph.D., I.A.S.)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SCRIPT OF SON ET LUMIÈRE ON THE ROCK ART AND CAVE ART GALLERY

Welcome to the Rock and Cave Art Gallery of the Government Museum, Chennai. The term *Rock Art* is commonly used to denote the paintings and engravings made on cave walls by the prehistoric people. The art of the historic people though it is in caves can be called *Cave Art*, to distinguish it from the International terminology 'Rock Art'. In this gallery, we present scenes from various rocks and caves of the prehistoric and historic periods, because many of these sites are very inaccessible.

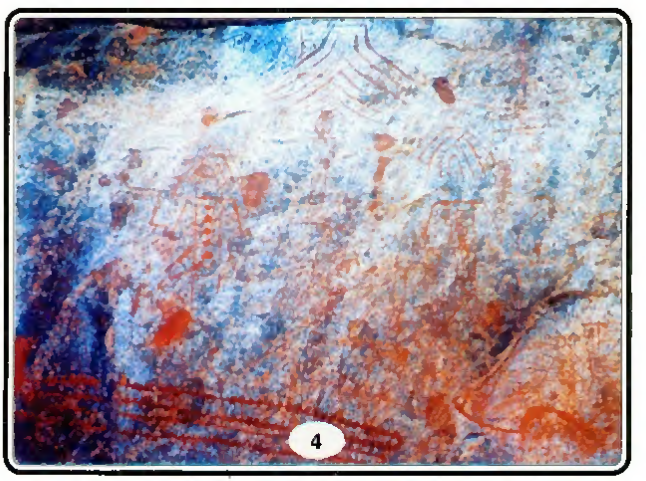
THE ROCK ART PANELS

1 We are standing at present, in the Introductory Gallery. First, here in front, you see what is called a Petroglyph.

Rock Art is divided into Petroglyphs and Petrographs. Petroglyphs were produced by carving on rock surface with the help of stone tools. In Petrographs, the Rock Art was drawn by twigs with red and white ochre pigments. Red ochre represents the earlier time period according to common consensus.

2 Here we present a site called *Perumukkal* in present Villupuram District, which is one of the three or four Petroglyph sites in India. Various people read various meanings into these carvings. In fact, some have even read the *Ramayana* into these figures.

3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3 This scene from *Iduhatti* rock in the Nilgiri district shows the sun, a star and the moon, from which we may infer that our prehistoric ancestors worshipped heavenly bodies and probably studied them also. May be there was a prehistoric astrologer-cum-priest or astronomer among them.

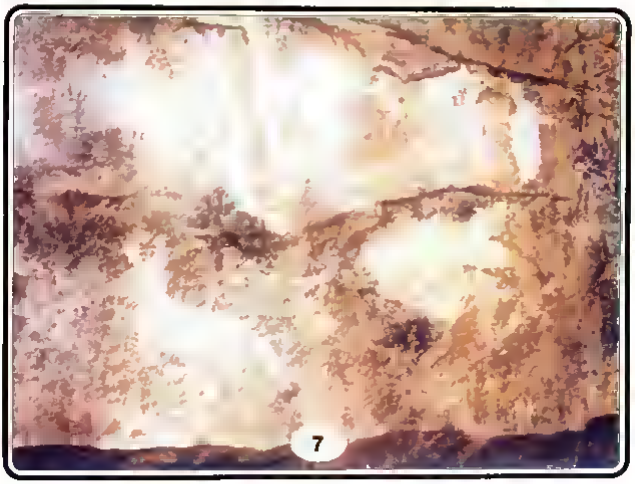
4 Here in front is a part of the Rock Art Site at *Vellerikombai* which is also called *Ezhuthuparai* or *writing rock*, deep in the hills on sheer rock face in the *Nilgiris* below *Kotagiri*. This scene represents a religious scene in which a sacrifice during prayer is being made. It has been explained in greater detail in the book on 'Holistic Dating' by Dr.R.Kannan, the Commissioner and also in the Touch Screen which you would have seen at the entrance.

5

6

5 *Bhimbetka* near *Bhopal* in Madhya Pradesh is one of the greatest Rock Art sites in the world. The research team from the Government Museum, *Chennai* visited this site before designing this Gallery. In this scene, you see a king and his soldiers riding on horses. They are carrying arms. The depiction of the horse is very important in that it shows that it was not an import of the late pre-historic period, as the 19th Century historians claimed, but the horse is an ancient animal in India.

6 Here we have a scene from *Kizhvalai* in Villupuram District which shows symbols. Some experts claim that these symbols are the forerunner of the Indus Script and are related to them and from these symbols the *Brahmi* script developed later on.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8

7 Now you see, what are called white ochre paintings, which are of a later period from the same *Vellerikombai* site in *Nilgiris* which we have seen earlier. A ram is shown here and a goat may be, and a figure with a staff, probably a shepherd who is taking care of his flock.

8 This scene is from *Alambadi*, Villupuram District which shows what are called x-ray drawings, i.e. the inner organs of animals and probably this was a prehistoric anatomy class according to some who claim that the ancient Indians had great knowledge of anatomy.

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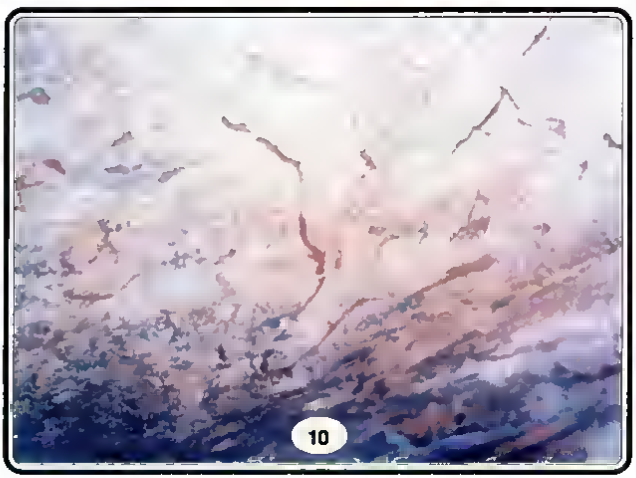
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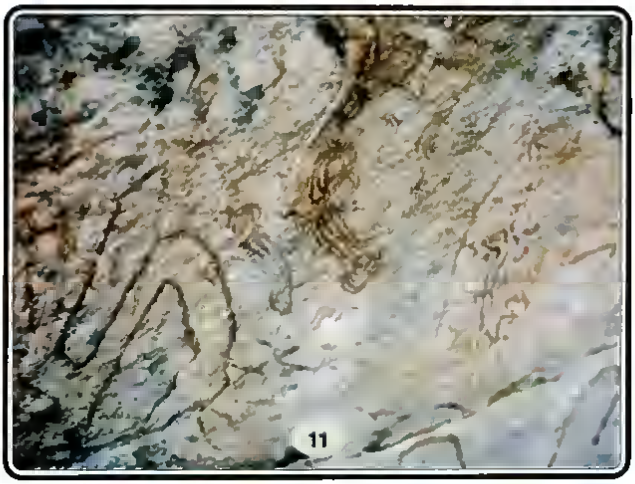
9 This Rock Art scene is from *Chenrayanpalli*, Gudiyattam Taluk, Vellore District. It shows some geometric designs. The white ochre figures show that they belong to a late priod. Sometimes such figures co-exist even with the historic period. The cross or plus sign is a symbol of prosperity found in *Vellerikombai*, Nilgiris and in the Harappan Civilisation period sites. Two birds are shown at the bottom and human beings near the centre of the drawing. These drawings could have later on metamorphosed to become the geometric *Chakra* designs of the Vedic age.

10 This red ochre drawing from *Alambadi*, Villupuram District of the very early prehistoric age shows a bird in flight. It represents an attempt to record visual observation. Since it is part of a series, it records a continuation from a whole scene. The anatomy x-ray drawing is an offshoot of such observation.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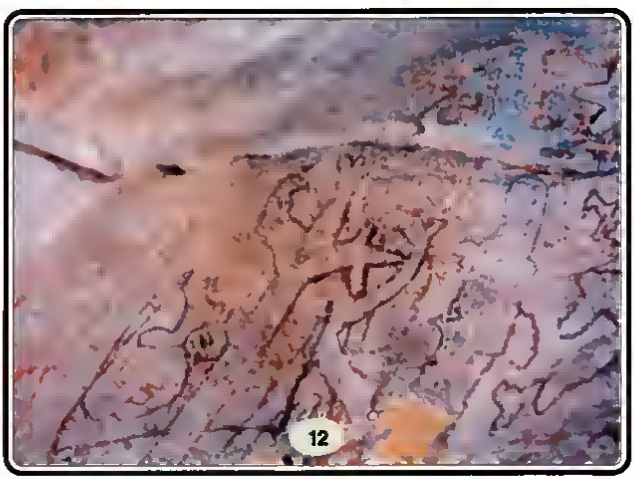
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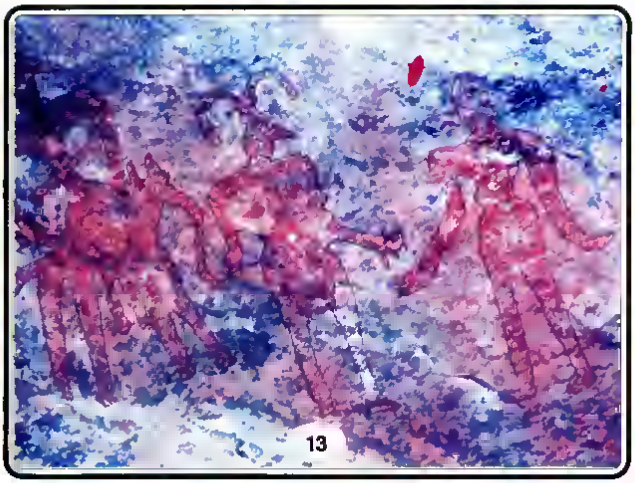
11 An x-ray painting from *Alambadi*, Villupuram District of the internal organs (may be) of a bird is depicted here.

12 This red ochre Rock Art is also from *Alambadi* and represents a continuation of the depiction of birds and animals. A bird in flight is seen depicted in large size at the centre.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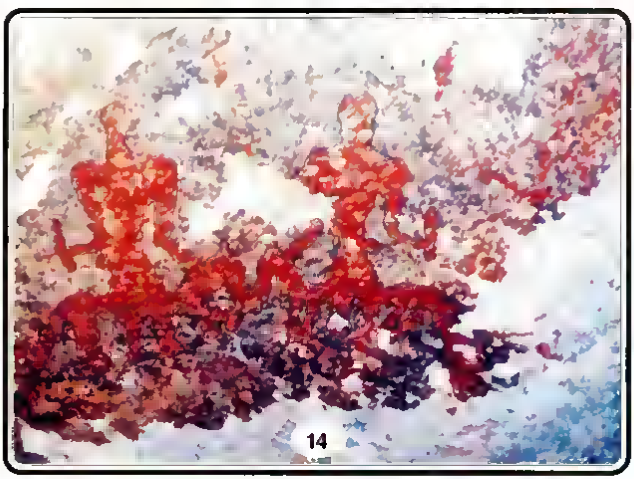
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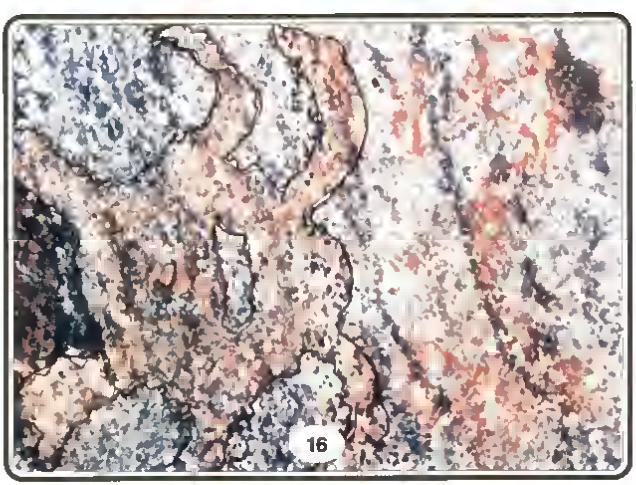
13 You are seeing now, three figures from *Kizhvalai*, again in Villupuram District which is a red ochre painting. It shows probably a man and a woman being led by a priest; the priest being the one in the centre having two feathers on his head, leading a person by his hand. The other person is watching. Whether this was a human or animal sacrifice or prayer, we cannot surmise exactly.

14 In this scene from *Kizhvalai*, where we see a man and a woman seated on something.It is a red ochre painting It is not clear whether it is an animal. It appears to be like an animal or it is some kind of a stone bench.

15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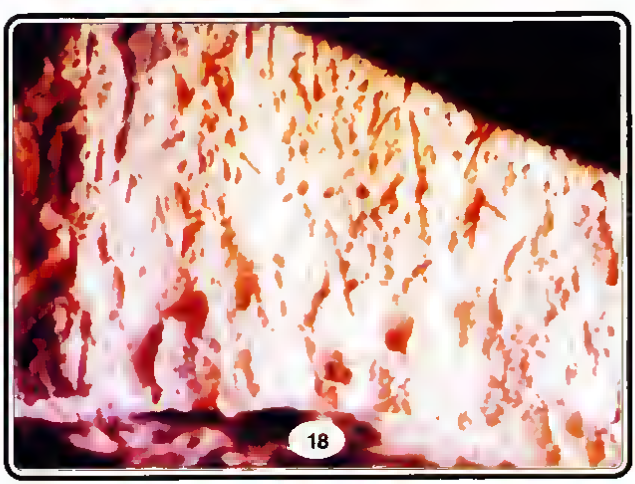
15 This panel shows the entry into the *Kizhvalai* Rock shelter, which is a prehistoric place and which from outside looks just like a stone hill, deserted by human beings.

16 This red ochre drawing in *Kizhvalai*, Villupuram District depicts some signs. The two geometric designs to the right side show how the plus sign could have changed to form a prehistoric, proto-*Swastik* or prosperity sign.

17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17 This is a red ochre painting scene at *Kizhvalai.* This shows four figures with faces with a beak like nose holding hands for a dance, suggesting that there were group dancers even in the prehistoric past.

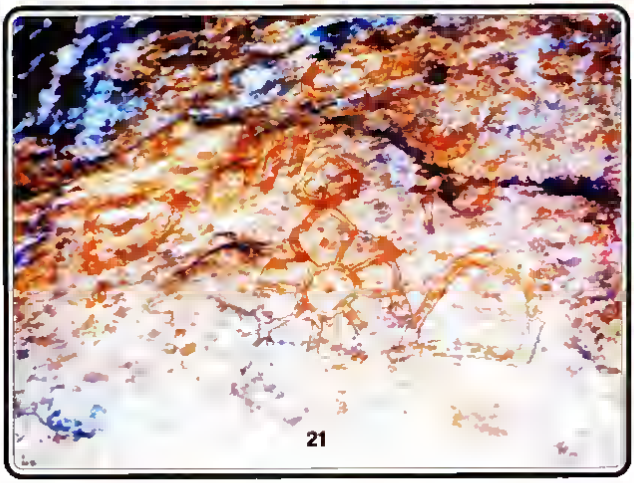
18 This is a scene from *Perumukkal.* This is a little different from what was shown in the Introductory Gallery. It shows a few cupules or disc like crater forms on rocks by way of Petroglyphs.

19

20

19 This is again from *Perumukkal*, which is a very important site in India. Of course, as we stated in the Introductory Gallery, people give different interpretations depending on their imagination.

20 The panel in front of you. shows the hill *Perumukkal*. On top is the temple, which belongs to the historic period. Parts of the temple are from the *Chola Era* but construction goes on right up to the Vijayanagar era. Behind the temple is the cave of *Perumukkal*, which is the Petroglyph site.



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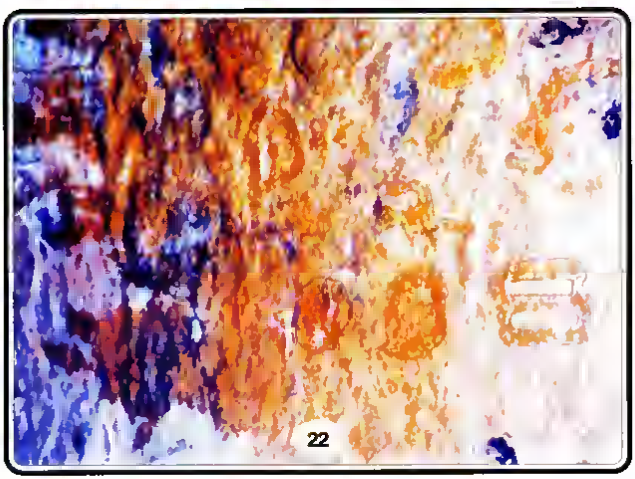
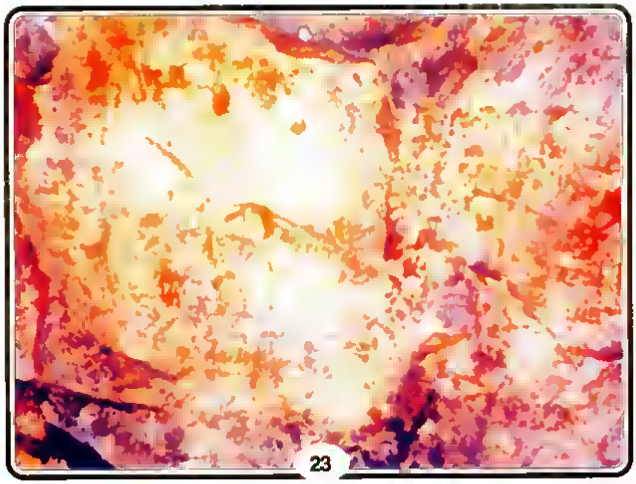


22

21 In front of you, now you see again a site from *Nilgiris-Iduhatti.* We have already seen the sun and the moon and stars being observed or worshipped. This seems to show a flower, like the sunflower. It can also be interpreted as a prehistoric *Kolam* or geometric drawing so common in South India. Since the Sun flower does not grow in the *Nilgiris,* it appears to show the migration of people from the plains to *Nilgiris.*

22 These are the symbols which Rock Art experts claim are a forerunner of the Indus Script. The site is *Iduhatti, Nilgiris.* Prof. Madhivanan claims to have interpreted these and he gives some meanings in his book on Rock Art. However one thing is clear that on the top left hand corner a primitive trident shaped figure can be seen. On the bottom right hand corner, the *Saivite* symbol of three lined *Vibhuti* can be seen. May be our present symbols are related to these prehistoric symbols of our ancestors.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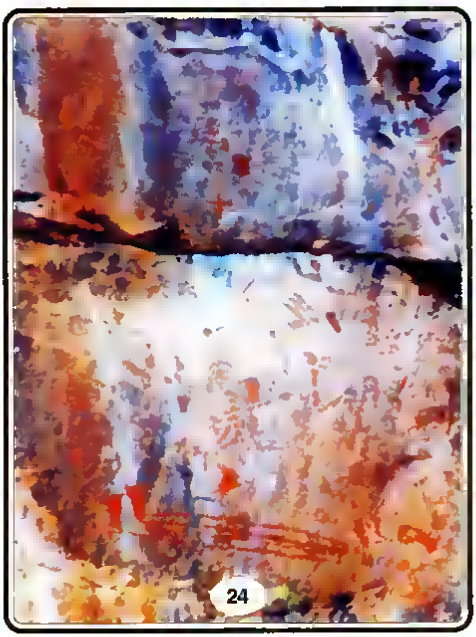
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23 This is a part of the scene at *Ezhuthuparai* the more interesting part of which is shown in the next panel.

24 This scene is from *Ezhuthuparai* (*Vellerikombai*). We have seen part of the scene already in the Introductory Gallery, which has been interpreted by Dr.Kannan, the Commissioner, in his book on 'Holistic Dating' as a scene representing a priest moving to an altar, which can be seen on the top right hand corner. Above is a plus sign, which is a prosperity symbol as a result of a sacrifice to be done to which he is taking a person. The entire scene is not shown and therefore the person being taken is not seen. We see certain unclear figures and some prehistoric birds in the centre.

25

26

25 This panel painting depicts the remote location of *Ezhuthuparai* (*Vellerikombai*), which the research team from the Department of Museums including the Commissioner visited. They had to go into deep forest about 10 kms to reach it. Many were injured. It is extremely inaccessible and hostile terrain, through virgin forest. It is slippery also with a sheer drop of several 1000 feet.

26 The Commissioner Dr. Kannan (with the stick) is explaining the scene at *Ezhuthuparai* to the other members of the Group while the video cameraman is shooting the scene.

27

28

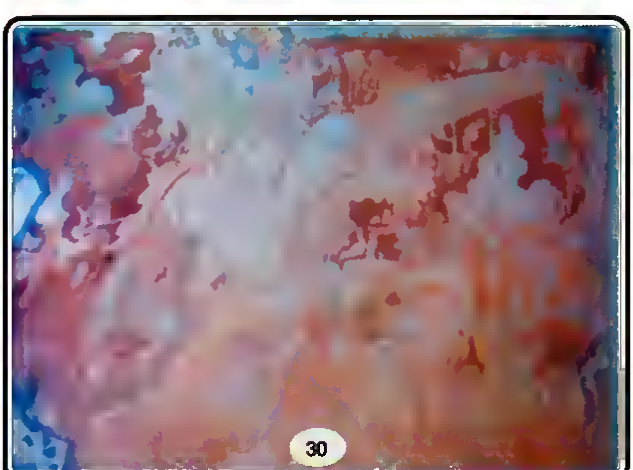
27 This is part of a drawing of white ochre *at Vellerikombai* and it is probably of a later period which shows one figure that has to be related to the paintings seen on the panel (No.7) which shows some animal like a goat or a sheep. You see two figures, which some people claim as a man and a woman. They can also be interpreted as two stars, the constellation *'Arundathi'*, which has two stars.

THE CAVE ART PANELS

We now come to the historic period of Cave Art. *Sittannavasal* a very famous cave art site in Pudukottai District from the 8th Century AD onwards is depicted here. The caves were carved for the Jain ascetics, who also inhabited them. We see a series of three panels here.

28 In this panel we see a celestial dancer or *Apsara.*

29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29 We see *Bavyas* or Jain saints in a lotus pond with an elephant.

30 In this painting, once again we see another celestial dancer or *Apsara.*

These *Sittannavasal* paintings can be compared with the *Ajanta* paintings. They are also made of vegetable and mineral dyes. Some of them have been tried to be preserved during the forties and fifties of the 20th century.

31

32

We now enter the *Thirugokarnam* cave which is more famously known as the *Brihadambal* Temple in *Pudukottai*. Goddess *Brihadambal* was the titular Deity of the erstwhile royal family. It is partially a rock cut cave temple. In this cave on the rock surface, sculptures of Lord *Ganesa*, *Sivalinga* and *Gangadhara* are carved.

31 A Panel depicting *Ganesa* of the *Brihadambal* Temple is sculptured as a bas-relief in the cave.

32 The central Deity is a *Sivalinga*. The *Linga* in the cubical sanctum is massive and cylindrical. It is one of the oldest *Lingas* of Tamilnadu and assignable to early 8^{th}-9^{th} Century AD.

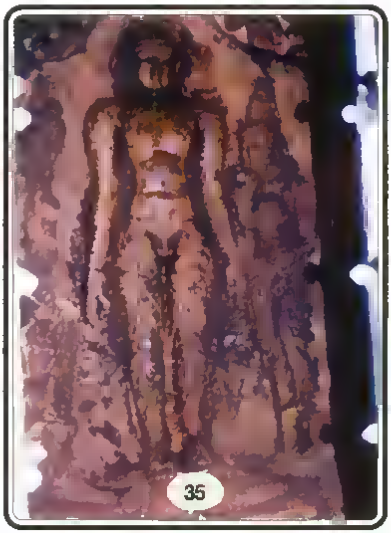
33

34

33 This panel shows a scene from *Brihadambal temple,Tirugokarnam.It* shows *Gangadhara* or *Siva* as the person who brings down the *Ganges*. The *Ganges* can be seen depicted as a flying angel as is usual in Hindu mythology. She is also seen on top of the head. *Siva* is depicted with four hands, the upper right hand carries the *Damaru* or drum and the upper left hand is just holding his hair lock, which is about to receive the *Ganges*. The bottom two hands are in the pose of holding the loop of his dress. These exquisite bas-relief carvings are from the 8th or 9th Century AD of the early *Pandya* period.

34 *Ganesha* ,we see in this panel is respresenting the one carved at *Kudumiyanmalai* in *Kudumiyanmalai* rock cut cave temple again in Pudukottai District which is about 22 kms from Pudukottai.

This is an ancient *Chola* temple, but there are also *Jain* carvings on the walls of the caves.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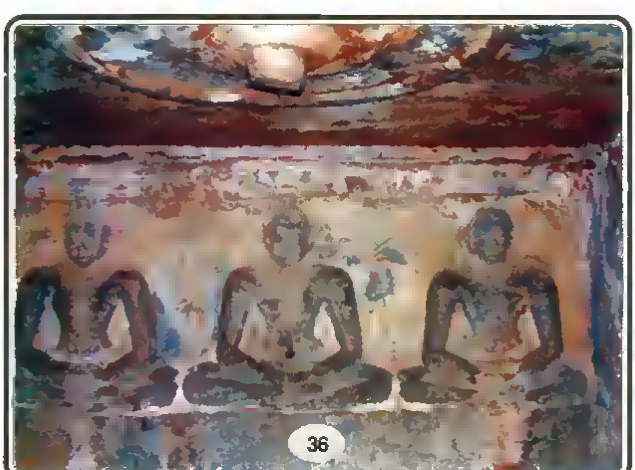
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35 The next scene, you see is from *Tirumalai* hill and cave complex, in the present Tiruvannamalai District. *Bahubali* is depicted here with his two sisters. The tallest statue on the hill is that of *Neminatha.*

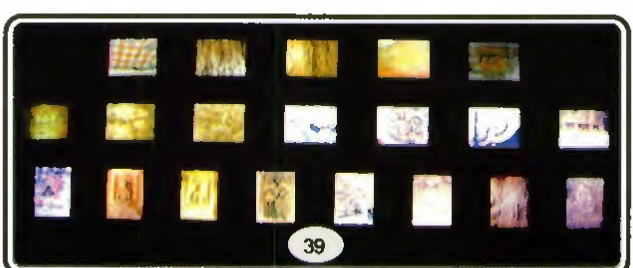
36 These are three *Tirthankaras* from *Sittannavasal,* Pudukottai District depicted as bas-relief sculptures.

37

37 This scene from *Mahabalipuram* portrays Lord *Mahavishnu* in *Ananthasayana* at the time of creation. In the story, *Brahma* is seated on a lotus with two leaves, issuing from the navel of *Vishnu*. The three *gunas* (types of qualities) *Satwa, Rajas & Tamas* - the first godly and the latter two symbolising human frailties also get created. *Rajas* and *Tamas* (symbolised as *Madhu* and *Kaitabha*) emanate from the ears of *Mahavishnu*. In the panel, they are the two large figures looking menacingly, standing *at the feet of Vishnu*. Goddess *Bhudevi* is at his feet seen worshipping him. The two figures at the side of the coils of *Adisesha* are the *Rishi, Markandeya* and *the Deva, Varuna*. The two flying figures symbolise the Conch-*Panchajanya* (Demon *Panchajana* subdued) which is the male figure and the mace *(Gada)* personified as *Kaumodaki* (the female figure).

Another version of *Ananthasayana* is that *Yoganidra* (*Vishnu* in a trance like state but with full awareness of what is going on) and *Yogamaya*, (this is the power of God in the creation personified as a Deity - i.e. the world is an illusion, which appears real to all living beings) are symbolised as the two small flying figures overhead of *Vishnu*.

38



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38 This is the last piece in which we show from left to right *Saptamatrikas* or seven Goddesses, *Virabhadra* and Lord *Ganesha* from *Tirugokarnam* in Pudukottai District. In Pudukottai town in the temple of *Brihadambal*, *Veerabadra* is shown next to Lord *Ganesha*. The seven goddesses counting from *Veerabhadra* are respectively *Brahmi*, *Vaishnavi*, *Maheswari*, *Varahi*, *Indrani*, *Chamunda* and *Koumari*. *Veerabhadra* is a terrifying form of Lord *Siva*.

39 We now present to you the Translides of the sites which our research team visited to bring all the remote sites to you from various inaccessible corners of India. We hope you have enjoyed your visit to this Gallery. You are welcome again.